

Re: Vietnam~~SECRET~~2 December 1967 *RHS*

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Comments on Saigon

1. The following are some comments on Saigon Station concerning the winter-spring campaign, coalition government, and negotiations. We intend to follow up with a memorandum on current Communist treatment of the subject of a coalition government. Some of the documents and reports cited in Saigon Station's cable have not yet reached Washington.

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2. We question whether Communist strategy in Vietnam is in a "state of flux" as suggested in the cable. Since at least early 1966, Communist strategy has been to prove to the US that it cannot achieve its objectives in Vietnam. At that time Hanoi realized it could not achieve the military victory it tried for earlier, and that it must wear down the US in a protracted conflict.. As part of this modified strategy, the Communists also began preparing the ground, as a contingency measure, to capitalize on any situation in which negotiations or political tactics could be employed.

3. The idea of negotiations as a device which might aid the Vietnamese Communist ^{cause} ~~cause~~ has appeared in documents regularly during the past two years. The references suggested that an

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effort was being made to indoctrinate cadres in the concept and be ready to move in that direction if circumstances were ripe. What seems to emerge in recent documents is a more explicit forecast of how a political settlement might come about.

4. The Saigon cable implies that the Communists may be thinking in terms of some positive move prior to the US elections to try a coalition strategy. This could be correct, but it seems more likely that what the documents show is a gradual evolution of a concept for what the Communist see as the most likely way for the conflict to end, but without specifying when it will take place. The documents do not suggest that the Communists intend to try for a coalition in the near future. They describe this as a possibility, and one which Communist forces should be prepared to cope with when the time comes.

5. We do not see any special significance in documents describing the winter-spring campaign as a "decisive" phase in the war. Similar descriptions have been used for earlier seasonal campaigns. They do not provide reliable indications of what the Communists really anticipate in the near future. Much of what is said in these documents is intended to indoctrinate Communist forces and prepare them for continuing battle. Although we have not seen all the documents cited in the Saigon

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cable, those we have seen suggest that Communist strategy in the winter-spring campaign is to maintain military pressure on allied forces in many areas. They do not suggest that the Communist think they can really mount a decisive campaign.

6. Re para 3: The Communists may have concluded earlier that the US would seek to end the war through negotiations before next year's elections, but there is little evidence that they think this now and considerable evidence that they expect the war to continue. It seems more likely ~~that~~ ^{they} believe that no settlement is possible until after the elections.

7. Re para 4: The Communists have long counted on disunity in South Vietnamese ranks to aid their cause. This is a fundamental element in their belief that the US cannot achieve its political and military goals in the South--at least not in an acceptable period of time. They have been relatively ineffective in exploiting SVN disunity in the past, and we agree that the Front's new program is designed to take advantage of these vulnerabilities more effectively.

8. It seems very doubtful that the Communist really believe they have a chance of "bringing the war to a victorious conclusion during 1968 as stated on page 4. The objectives listed in A, B. & C certainly cannot be achieved in the next year; and this suggests that D, which calls for the formation of a coalition government, is not a near-term goal~~s~~. All four of these objectives seem to be long-range Communist plans and

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not ones they expect to achieve soon. Paragraphs 6, 7, & 8 present a reasonable accurate, though somewhat exaggerated, description of Communist tactics during the winter-spring campaign. It is, of course, absurd to ^{suggest}~~suggest~~ that 75 percent of the current GVN-controlled areas are to be liberated.

9. Re a coalition government: This was part of the original 10-point Front program of 1961. The idea appears to have evolved considerably ^{since}~~since~~ then, and it is now the political equivalent of the military concept of a protracted war instead of a quick military victory. Just as the Communists understood that a military solution to the conflict was no longer possible, they seem to have come around to the view that a political compromise of some kind--without abandoning their primary goal of dominating the South--^{is}~~was~~ the only way that they could hope to drive the US out of the country and eventually achieve success.

10. Documents in early 1966 discussed eventual negotiations, and even said they might take place soon, but the notion of a coalition government is not treated in detail. Le Duan is quoted in one document as specifically ruling out the concept of a coalition. He said it would bring about a quick settlement, but would cause "many difficulties in the future." The main

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emphasis in these documents was on preparing for a continuation of the war, and not being misled if negotiations of some kind occurred.

11. A call for the formation of a broad national coalition government composed of diverse elements was again made in the Liberation Front's new political program drawn up last August and made public in September. Since then, this topic has become an important theme in Communist propaganda and Vietnamese Communist spokesmen have some times gone into considerable detail in discussing a coalition. The new emphasis is in line with other elements of the revised Front program and seems to be aimed at making the concept more appealing to a wider number of people.

12. The rash of references to a coalition government in documents this fall probably is not connected with the current military campaign. More likely it reflects the need to explain the significance of this point in the Front's program. The documents clearly seek to calm the fears of any who might be alarmed by this ^{aspect} ~~xxx~~ of Communist tactics. The documents show that efforts were being made to refine the concept and explain exactly what the leadership has in mind. We certainly agree that the idea of a coalition does not indicate any lowering of Communist goals and that they fully intend to dominate any

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coalition government. If they could not, they would refuse to participate. This is explicit in the documents.

13. The tough and unyielding North Vietnamese stance on negotiations is designed to support the strategy discussed above. Communist spokesmen have taken pains to draw a clear distinction between any US - NorthVietnamese talks, which might follow a bombing halt, and a settlement of the conflict in the South, which they insist must be worked out with the Liberation Front. The greater emphasis on this distinction and on the Front's program is designed to prepare the ground for an eventual political settlement, and the Front's call for a coalition government seems to have become an integral part of the Communist concept for how this may come about. There is nothing to suggest, however, that the Communists are counting on this taking place in the near future.